

Radio Release Being Developed For Planes Carrying A-Bombs

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Under a new electronic link system now being developed, aircraft of NATO countries eventually may be able to carry American nuclear weapons on patrol for immediate activation by special radio signal in emergency.

Such prompt response is not yet possible with the elaborate safeguards employed to prevent misuse or accidental detonation of American nuclear weapons abroad.

These safeguards are considered so foolproof at the present time that not even the almost inconceivable seizure of a plane by a madman could set off a nuclear war. This is a form of reassurance to the Soviet Union as well as to the NATO countries.

Even if a Communist attack were to overrun and seize American nuclear weapons stockpiled in NATO countries, these weapons could not be activated without a special signal. They also are regarded as crash-proof.

Moreover, in the event of attempted sabotage or tinkering by enemy specialists, nuclear weapons are so fixed that they become duds or even blow up in a non-nuclear explosion. In such circumstances or in a plane crash, some radio-activity might be released but it presumably would not be widespread.

American officials are annoyed at Soviet propaganda depicting a German finger on the nuclear trigger. Although the great majority of American nuclear weapons abroad are stockpiled in Germany, no German command alone could activate the weapons. As a practical matter, Germany could not even use its own carrier vehicle without American assent.

In this respect Germany is in the same position as other NATO countries, and no change in the arrangements has been suggested or contemplated.

Here is how the present system, often loosely called a double-key system, actually works:

American nuclear warheads assigned to NATO are stockpiled under American control in Germany, Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Canada, Greece and Turkey. They also are available for wartime use by French forces in Germany.

Each country is responsible for its own delivery vehicles—aircraft, Sergeant or Pershing missiles, howitzers and the like. But the nuclear warheads could not be mounted without American orders or detonated without a permissive link.

In the case of a German F-104 squadron assigned to NATO, the requisite number of nuclear warheads would be kept quickly available under American custody.

Perhaps one fourth of the Starfighters would actually

be on the runway loaded with American weapons under a 15-minute alert. American troops would guard the planes, and the planes could not take off until a physical barrier was removed.

Moreover, the nuclear weapons could not be activated unless a special signal was received upon specific authorization of the President.

Authority would be delegated in emergency to the Supreme Commander of American Forces in Europe (SACEUR), in the present instance Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, who also is Supreme Allied Commander of NATO forces in Europe.

Authorization for the arming of American weapons would have to be accompanied, in the case of Germany, by a separate German decision to release the carrier vehicles for use.

Controls were not always this rigorous. When representatives of the congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy visited Europe in 1960, Chairman Chet Holifield and Staff Director James Ramey (now a member of the Atomic Energy Commission) objected that precautions were not adequate.

Their objections resulted in the development of the so-called permissive link system. Originally this meant an actual physical link that has been likened to a combination lock on a safe.

This lock could not be opened until the formula was furnished to the American custodians. Thereupon the weapons could be armed for plane takeoff or missile firing.

An electronic system is being installed at the present time. In the future, the new development may permit the crew of a plane already aloft to arm weapons it carries.

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